How did sport clubs rock the COVID-19 pandemic?

Organizational contributions to institutional resilience in a disruptive extreme context

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1. **Abstract**

The Covid-19 pandemic has been an enormous challenge not only for individuals and (non-)profit-organizations, but also for institutions as collective actors that constitute a field, industry, or sector, such as the sport sector. The capacity of responding as collective to such extreme contexts is termed institutional resilience. Based on a qualitative empirical approach (22 expert interviews), the paper aims at analyzing, how sport clubs contribute to the resilience of the sport club system in the extreme context of Covid-19 pandemic. Following the perspective of institutional work sport clubs mainly focused on cultural work and technical work, but also on political work for enabling institutional resilience. The paper contributes to resilience, extreme context and to sport research with a focus on institutional work predominately by refining the understanding of institutional resilience as well as by proving corresponding mechanisms for achieving it.

1. **Introduction**

The Covid-19 pandemic induced encompassing disruptions of political, economic, and social processes as well as there were organizational respectively institutional disruptions (Sarkar & Clegg, 2021; Brammer et al., 2020). Thus, we refer to the Covid-19 pandemic as an extreme context which entails that actors are confronted with an intense, risky, and often dangerous environment (Maynard et al., 2018) resulting in significant and high-risk task, social and environmental demands for the actors (Driskell et al., 2018). The pandemic represents the specific occurrence of a disruptive extreme context which represent the “most extreme punctuation of normalcy” (Sarkar & Clegg, 2021, 244) due to their core feature of various substantial disruptions e.g., at the organizational, industrial, and/or economic level (Brammer et al., 2020).

The Covid-19 pandemic also severely hit sport clubs. Primarily at the beginning of the pandemic, lockdowns led to the shutdown of their operations and to the suspension of any competitions, even championships, which led in turn to tremendous income losses (Hall, 2020; Meyer et al., 2021). There were not only drastic effects for the sport clubs, but also significant impacts for large parts of the population, e.g., in Austria, because the shutdown of sports clubs, gyms and fitness centers for months or even permanently meant no regular exercises as one of the crucial preventive health measures for individuals. Thus, Covid-19 pandemic can be also considered as fitness crisis (Jungwirth, Weninger & Haluza, 2021).

Individuals, teams, organizations, systems, communities, or societies which succeed in dealing with disruptions are often termed resilient (Linnenluecke, 2017). Thus, resilience can be located at different levels (e.g., individual, organizational) respectively has a multilevel nature (Williams et al., 2017; Raetze et al., 2021). Whereas research often deals with resilience at the organizational level, we lack research regarding institutional resilience (Krlev, 2022; Hillmann & Guenther, 2020) in terms of how institutions as “a collective of diverse actors (public, private and/or nonprofit) that constitute for example a field or industry” (Krlev, 2022), e.g., health or sports sector, deals with adversity. Institutional resilience refers to the interplay between crises and institutions as “the process whereby institutions recover after having undergone a significant disruption” (Barin Cruz et al., 2016, 971). Institutions are resilient, if they manage it after severe disruptions and correspondingly the very likely suspensions of various e.g., regulations and norms to bank on the persisting ones or rather to adapt/reorganize previous institutional work activities as basis for practices for action (Barin Cruz et al., 2016; Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006).

The growing number of encompassing crises respectively extreme contexts (Jia et al., 2020), such as the refugee crisis in 2015/2016 or nation-wide natural disasters stress the importance to understand institutional resilience or rather the process of enabling institutional resilience. Actors, such as organizations, can i.a. change an institutional field (Gawer & Phillips, 2013). A concept which focuses on the relationship between institutions and diverse actors populating them, is the concept of institutional work, as it deals with “the broad category of purposive action aimed at creating, maintaining, and disrupting institutions” (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006, 216). In addition to this contentual fit, we decided to rely on the theoretical lens of institutional work because Nite & Edwards (2021, 830) claim in their review that it is necessary to explore the empirical relationships between institutional work and specific institutional challenges in sports, such as threats, e.g., the Covid-19 pandemic.

To narrow both gaps, the one regarding institutional resilience as well as the one regarding institutional work in sports, we aim at exploring the question *of how sport clubs can contribute to institutional resilience of the sport club system during the COVID-19 pandemic as disruptive extreme context.*

Relying on an institutional work perspective and a qualitative research approach based on 22 expert interviews with executives of sport organizations which were conducted between April 2021 to March 2022, we provide various contributions to resilience, extreme context and to sport research with a focus on institutional work. This mainly consists in refining the understanding of institutional resilience of the sport club system as well as in providing corresponding mechanisms for achieving it (for details see chapter 6).

The paper proceeds as follows: In the next section, we briefly illustrate the context, the theoretical background and current research insights concerning institutional resilience in extreme contexts from institutional work perspective. After a compact outline of a methodological choices, we present our findings followed by a discussion and conclude with brief reflection of the results.

1. **Contextual framing, theoretical background and current research insights**
   1. *Sport clubs in the Covid-19 pandemic as extreme (disruptive) context*

Sport clubs such as football, tennis, horse, swimming, ice-hockey, basketball, or golf clubs provide a wide range of sport and recreation possibilities. E.g., in Austria 15.000 sport clubs performing for their about 297.000 members in 2022 (Statista, 2023). Their social return of investment accounts to 7.655 billion €; each invested Euro generates a value of 14 € for society (Vienna online, 2021). Sport clubs have different functions: they provide opportunities for exercising and hence essentially contribute to public health, but also have social, integrative respective community building functions. They provide places and options for socializing and integrating their members, youngsters, elderly people, locals, immigrants etc. (Wicker, Filo & Cuskelly, 2013).

The Covid-19 pandemic as extreme contexts led to highly challenging and exceptional conditions for sport clubs. Extreme contexts in general refer to situations which are risky, dangerous, intense risky, intense and often-dangerous (Maynard et al., 2018) Negative physical, psychological, or material effects are unavoidable (Hannah et al., 2009). Hällgren et al. (2018) propose a typology of extreme contexts including risky, emergency, and disruptive contexts. Risky contexts, e.g., an oil drilling or firefighting, are extreme contexts with a near-constant ever-present potentiality of catastrophe, while in emergency (and disrupted) contexts the adversity has become a reality, e.g., an actual shooting in a school for the police. Whereas emergencies allow for preparation, disruptive contexts do not. Due to the rare and unforeseen nature of their triggers, e.g., the SARS-CoV-2 virus in the disruptive extreme context of the pandemic, organizations commonly can neither anticipate them, nor prepare specific countermeasures or specialized resources like emergency plans. Thus, organizations or communities are hit predominantly unprepared (Hällgren et al., 2018).

During Covid-19 pandemic sport clubs had to stop at least temporarily their operations and service deliveries including the suspensions of trainings, social gatherings, and other club activities. Covid-19 directives also implied, primarily at the beginning of the pandemic, a cancellation or postponement of competitions in terms of leagues and championships which in turn resulted in lost revenues from ticket sales and merchandising and partly also from sponsorships. Various subsidies and fonds compensated these losses, though, at least partly (Breuer, Feiler & Rossi, 2021; Stötzer, Keplinger & Kaltenbrunner, forthcoming). After some months, e.g., Austrian government enacted the “Spitzensportregelung” which enabled primarily professional clubs of the federal league to do trainings and finally also to continue competitions, such as the champion league in soccer.

The restrictions or even the prohibitions of trainings, social gatherings etc. also severely affected fan, community and member interactions as well as volunteer management. The number of club members generally decreased, particularly in larger clubs. Thus, recruiting and retaining members became more and more challenging. The implementation of health and safety protocols, frequent testing, temperature checks, sanitization measures, and social distancing guidelines demanded an encompassing use of human and time resources. Moreover, clubs had to develop virtual trainings and coachings as well as to continually provide adequate internal and external communications. Clubs claimed that there was a deficient governmental consideration of their needs as well as there were bureaucratic burdens regarding the implementation of Covid-19 directives (Breuer, Feiler & Rossi, 2021; Stötzer, Keplinger & Kaltenbrunner, forthcoming).

* 1. *Linking institutional resilience of the sport club system with institutional work*

Even though, the research interest regarding resilience has grown over the last three decades (Bryan, O’Shea & MacIntyre, 2017; c.f. Estrada, Severt, & Jiménez-Rodríguez, 2016).) which advanced defining, conceptualization and theorizing, there are numerous definitions and operationalizations of resilience (Raetze et al. 2021; Hillmann & Guenther 2020). This is particularly due to resilience’s complex and context specific nature (Williams et al., 2017, Hillmann & Guenther, 2020). The word stem of resilience roots in the Latin term “resilire”, which means to “jump back” to a former position or rather to bounce back to the original equilibrium (Guistiniano et al., 2020). The understanding of resilience to come back to an earlier “normal” corresponds with static resilience, whereas dynamic resilience aims at a new equilibrium or even new equilibria in terms of an “adjusted optimality” because it is not possible to return to a former state. Thus, dynamic resilience refers to evolution (Mithani, 2020). As resilience is an interdisciplinary construct there is a wide range of different definitions. Resilience is defined as e.g., a trait, capacity, capability, characteristic, outcome, process, or even as a combination of these aspects (Hillman & Guenther, 2020; Bryan, O’Shea & MacIntyre, 2017).

Even though, there are various definitions, there is quite a common consensus that resilience refers to individuals, teams, organizations, communities etc. who can withstand adversities, are able to respond to destabilizing or even disruptive disturbances or can recover from shocks and finally show positive outcomes after unexpected or disruptive events. Moreover, resilience is associated with organizational reliability, adaptability of business models or design principles for limiting disruptions of supply chains (Linnenluecke, 2017). As mentioned before, resilience is a multilevel construct respectively has a multilevel nature (individuals, teams, organizations, systems, communities, or societies etc. (Witmer & Mellinger, 2016; Williams et al., 2017; Jalil et al., 2021).

We follow Williams et al.’s (2017) broad understanding of resilience because it considers various actors (individuals, organizations, communities) and thus refers to the multi-level nature of this construct (Raetze al., 2021; Jalil et al., 2021), it also relates to the interface between an actor and its environment (Mithani 2020) and finally, also it accounts for the evolving character of resilience (Witmer & Mellinger 2016). Williams et al. (2017) define resilience “as the process by which an actor (i.e., individual, organization, or community) builds and uses its capability endowments to interact with the environment in a way that positively adjusts and maintains functioning prior to, during, and following adversity” (p. 742).

The multilevel nature of resilience already indicates that dealing effectively with extreme contexts represents a collective response (Mithani, 2020). Thus, e.g., Stötzer et al. (2022) identified various collaborative internal and external networks on local, regional, and federal level which enable organizational resilience (of healthcare and social NPOs) for fighting against the pandemic.

We do not focus on organizational resilience, though, but we approach resilience at a macro level in terms of institutional resilience. Thus, we are interested in exploring, how a collective of various actors enables resilience of an industry or field (Krlev, 2022). In our case, it is the sport club system. Hills (2000) states that institutional resilience [generally] relates to an institution´s survival and continued effectiveness over time“ (p. 110). With focus on crisis the scholar defines it as “ability to resume an original position after crisis and an adaptability contingent on a proven usefulness within a specific environment” (p. 117). Similarly, Turenne et al. (2019, 177) emphasize the “bounce back” and “continue to function” nature of institutional resilience (system resilience) in the health sector in a crisis. Following a (c)ability-based view as well, Blanchet et al. (2017) regard institutional resilience of the health sector as the “capacity of health system to absorb, adapt and transform when exposed to a shock such as a pandemic, natural disaster or armed conflict and still retain the same control on its structure and functions” (p. 432). Accordingly, absorptive, adaptive and transformative capacity can be regarded as seminal abilities or rather capacities (Blanchet et al., 2017). Also, Barin Cruz et al. (2016) focus on institutional resilience in a crisis or rather an extreme context. Scholars accentuate the process nature of resilience and term it as “the process whereby institutions recover after having undergone a significant disruption” (Barin Cruz et al., 2016, 971). Thus, institutional resilience serves as “bracketed stability” or as guidance for the actors in their fight against an adversity and also enables the actors´ resilience, e.g., organizational resilience. Due to focus on the process [which is in accordance with Williams et al. (2017) resilience definition (see above)] and the emphasis on disruptions we follow Barin Cruz et al.´s (2016) definition in combination with Krlev’s valuable precision that institutional resilience represents an aggregate endeavor of the respective population in the field, e.g., health, sports and stresses rules, norms, and multiple actors.

As mentioned in the introduction, institutional resilience in general and in (disruptive) extreme contexts in particular, is rarely explored from an institutional work view. Crucial exception is the paper of Barin Cruz and colleagues who focus on NGOs and their contribution to institutional resilience in the extreme context of an earthquake in Haiti. Main findings are that based on social capital securing operations, mobilizing solidarity and bridging partners as institutional work activities enabled institutional resilience in Haiti. Thus, this paper reflects all of our three core interests: institutional resilience, institutional work and extreme contexts. Krlev´s (2022) paper on institutional resilience, multistakeholder partnership in crisis also covers institutional resilience. The scholar describes very interestingly the nature and dynamics of collaborations between the different actors and particularly the precursors and the relations of crisis to institution but does not focus on institutional work in the narrower sense. Moreover, he discusses the lack of moral in institutional approaches to crisis. Worth mentioning is also the research note of Hills (2000) focusing on institutional resilience of the African police system in a crisis situation. Following a political line of argumentation, the scholar discusses the factors promoting the capabilities adaptions and accommodation but not by means of institutional work. Also, Lowndes & McCaughie (2013) focus on a political or rather public system. They explore local English authorities which have to deal with encompassing budget cuts and increased citizen demands regarding services at the same time. Creative service designs based on institutional bricolage and pragmatic politics were the key in solving this crisis. Finally, institutional resilience in times of crisis is discussed in the health sector. Evert et al. (2022) explores the resilience of different European health systems during the Covid-19 pandemic focusing how the countries dealt with various bottlenecks in their respective health systems. Focusing on resilience-oriented policy actions, they point out forms of institutional working specific to Covid-19 pandemic, e.g., institutional working rounds for testing capacity. Moreover, e.g., Blanchet et al. (2017) as well as Carthey (2001) concentrate in their research on health system resilience. Moreover, there is research focusing on institutional work at system level, e.g., Micelotta & Washington (2013), Ramirez (2012) or Curie et al. (2012) (see Barin Cruz et al. 2016).

Institutions which encompass a field´s norms, regulations, and rules (Hinings et al., 2017) are resilient, if they succeed in executing stability and in providing (adapted) regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive elements which have persisted during a crisis (Barin Cruz et al., 2016; Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). Actors, e.g., organizations such as professional associations or governmental bodies, can shape institutions or institutional characteristics. To advance their interests, to influence others or to react to environmental changes actors can e.g., affect institutional logics (Seo & Creed, 2002) or can change institutions (Nite & Edwards, 2021; Gawer & Phillips, 2013). Again, a concept which focuses on the relationship between institutions and diverse actors populating them, is the concept of institutional work, as it deals with “the broad category of purposive action aimed at creating, maintaining, and disrupting institutions” (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006, 216). The effectiveness or rather outcome of creating, maintaining, or disrupting activities of the actors is influenced by the institutional environment (the social, cultural, economic, political and technology context) (Seo & Greed, 2002).

In this respect, the seminal review by Lawrence & Suddaby (2008) is to note. Scholars have profoundly shape(d) research regarding institutional work by proposing the typology of creating, maintenance and disruption work. Creation work aims at introducing innovative practices, creating new institutions, or transforming existing ones (Nite et al., 2019). It encompasses three subcategories. These are political work (advocacy, defining and vesting), reconfiguring belief systems (constructing identities, changing normative associations and constructing normative networks), and altering boundaries of meaning systems (mimicry, theorizing, and educating). Maintenance work refers to “supporting, repairing, or recreating the social mechanisms that ensure compliance” (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006, 230). It consists of two subcategories, firstly compliance to rule systems with enabling, policing, and deterring work and secondly, perpetuating norms and beliefs with valorizing/demonizing, mythologizing, and embedding/routinizing as mechanisms. Whereas the “rules subcategory” relates to the creation and enforcements of rules, standards or policies, the latter one includes “values and norms that introduce a prescriptive, evaluative, and obligatory dimension into social life” (Scott, 2008, p. 54). The typology is completed by disruption work resulting from the concept of deinstitutionalization involving disconnecting sanctions (regulative), disassociating moral foundations (normative) and undermining assumptions and beliefs for disrupting (cultural cognitive). Moreover, there are further typologies of institutional work, e.g., the one of Perkman & Spicer (2007). Relying on the elements of institutions which are cultured-cognitive, normative and regulative ones and based on Lawrence & Suddaby (2006), scholars differ between political work, technical work, and cultural work. This is followed by various empirical proved refinements and complements, see e.g., Slager, Gong & Moon (2012) or Kaartemo, Nenonen & Windahl (2020).

Summarizing the paragraphs above, we can conclude that there is need of research regarding institutional resilience in extreme contexts which require encompassing recovering activities due to massive disruptions which is not to be equated with minor adaption activities after slight disturbances (c.f. Barin Cruz et al., 2016). To the best of the authors´ knowledge there is no research paper dealing with institutional resilience in the sport (club) system in an extreme context.

1. **Methods**

To answer our research question, of how sports clubs can contribute to institutional resilience in the sport club system during the COVID-19 pandemic as disruptive extreme context we chose an explorative qualitative research design based on semi-structured and problem-focused expert interviews. We thus could gather detailed information and perceptions about specific circumstances from experts (Gläser & Laudel, 2009). We conducted the expert interviews with executives of sport clubs and associated organizations, such as club colleges for young players or unions, to gain in-depth insights into the institutional activities during the COVID-19 pandemic and to enhance our understanding of how clubs (re-)created and maintained the club sport system.

What regards the selection of the organizations, we decided to explore team sport clubs which were particularly restricted by the Covid-19 directives, compared to individual sports, such as mountain trailing.

Besides, we chose a purposive sampling strategy, which allowed us to improve the depth, relevance, and richness of the qualitative data (Patton, 2002). We used a maximum variation purposive sampling which especially aims at selecting participants of a wide range of characteristics, viewpoints, or experiences. Thus, we could further enlarge the diverse perspectives and deepen the understanding of the phenomenon related to our research topic (Patton, 2002). In sum, we used the following three selection criteria:

* Team sport clubs (soccer, volleyball, fistball, volleyball and ice-hockey) which are
* active in Austria (in particular, Salzburg and Upper Austria) und Germany (Bavaria and (Lower) Saxony) and of
* small and large size (based on income thresholds) of the “Vereinsgesetz 2002” (the Austrian law for associations)

In total, we conducted 22 interviews with executives, such as chairmen, section leaders, heads of youth work etc.) because they were responsible to take countermeasures against the pandemic (see table 1). Besides, they were often engaged in informal interorganizational exchanges and/or in formal interorganizational committees or boards dealing with Covid-19 pandemic or did negotiations with governmental authorities in their formal functions or positions,

Table 1. Overview of the interview sample and interview(ee)s (own elaboration)

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Interviewee | Field of activity | Job title | Gender | Duration (min) |
| 1 | IP 1 | basketball | section leader / trainer | female | 41 |
| 2 | IP 2 | volleyball | head of youth work | female | 25 |
| 3 | IP 3 | soccer | section leader | male | 82 |
| 4 | IP 4 | soccer | chairman / trainer | male | 36 |
| 5 | IP 5 | basketball | chairman | male | 46 |
| 6 | IP 6 | soccer | board memb./secretary/trainer | male | 43 |
| 7 | IP 7 | fistball | section leader | female | 54 |
| 8 | IP 8 | volleyball | managing director (founder) | female | 36 |
| 9 | F1 | soccer | team manager | male | 38 |
| 10 | E2 | ice-hockey | sports director | male | 52 |
| 11 | F3 | soccer | manager of goalkeepers | male | 25 |
| 12 | E4 | union | chairman | male | 45 |
| 13 | E5 | ice-hockey | head of youth work | male | 50 |
| 14 | E6 | ice-hockey | head of youth work | male | 84 |
| 15 | E7 | ice-hockey | CEO of the club | male | 40 |
| 16 | E8 | ice-hockey | sports coordinator | male | 53 |
| 17 | F9 | soccer | chairman | male | 65 |
| 18 | F10 | soccer | sports coordinator | male | 47 |
| 19 | F11 | soccer | school and sports coordinator | male | 77 |
| 20 | E12 | ice-hockey | CEO of the club | male | 31 |
| 21 | F13 | soccer | managing director (college) | male | 37 |
| 22 | F14 | soccer | pedagogical supervisor | male | 60 |
| Σ 22 Interviews in 22 sport clubs and associated organizations with 18 % females and 82 males | | | | | Ø 48,5 |

The interviews were conducted in the period from April 21 till the end of March 2022. The language of interviews was German. Due to Covid-19 restrictions we conducted the interviews mostly online (except for three face-to-face interviews) by means of the conferencing tools Zoom and Microsoft Teams. The 22 interviews lasted between 25 and 84 minutes (48,5 min. on an average). All interviews were recorded (video- or audiotaped with the consent of the interviewees) and afterwards transcribed verbatim. For comparability and guidance, we used an interview guideline.

For this paper, we analyzed the answers to the following two questions:

* How did you overcome the Covid-19 pandemic and to what extent did you collaborate with other organizations (NPO, public institutions, companies ...)?
* What have you learned from the COVID-19 pandemic?

We consciously decided not to ask explicitly for the term “resilience” in line with the method of non-directive questioning. This should prevent a possible overemphasis of the resilience construct which generally has a positive connotation (Langley & Meziani, 2020). For a structured and rigorous data analysis we chose the qualitative content analysis according to Mayring (2015). The first order categories were defined deductively (see chapter 3.2). The coding process was done be the two authors. Each author developed an own initial coding schema. We used team reflexive dialogue and reflexive writing for reflecting and evaluating subjectivity and the context as research influencing factors (Olmos-Vega et al., 2022). In order to guarantee intercoder reliability, two authors intensively discussed the codes at least once a week and thus added and revised the coding schema and the paraphrases.

1. **Findings**

In general, the sport club system can look back at a successful past respectively at proud records. As initially indicated, the impact of Covid-19 was massive. In particular, at the beginning of the pandemic the club sport system suffered from severe disruptions and even partly collapsed due to legally enacted shutdowns of operations and the suspensions of competitions (Jungwirth, Weninger & Haluza, 2021; Begović, 2022). Interviewees claimed that the suspension of competitions withdrew the basis for sponsoring. Clubs could not fulfill their sponsoring contracts any more. Even though, this resulted in financial losses, most of the clubs were at least able to maintain their sponsoring relationships. Interviewees also emphasized that the sale of fan article and sport equipment, catering activities as well as the activities of transfer agencies were also suspended for months. Due to physical distancing and lock downs club members, family members and other volunteers were banished from the sport facilities. Hence, clubs lost a crucial (human) pillar of service delivery. Moreover, the exclusion of the audience in its different roles, e.g., as “twelfth player in soccer” but also as consumer and buyer should not be underestimated. To cope with the adversity sport clubs started various formal and informal exchanges and collaborations which aimed at continuing the sport club systems (see figure 1).

The subsequent section points out in a compact overview how institutional work mechanisms were used to achieve institutional resilience. Primarily based on the typology of Perkmann & Spicer (2007) which is based on Lawrence and Suddaby (2006) we adopted, refined and added political, cultural, and technical work mechanisms for the sport club system during the Covid-19 pandemic. This also includes an illustration of the corresponding main activities for each subcategory (political, cultural, and technical work) in detail (see table 2).

*Political work*

In theory, this type of institutional work covers advocacy and defining as subcategories. Particularly, at the beginning and during the first months of the Covid-19 pandemic, interviewees reported a strong focus on political work in terms of the development of rules and regulations. Due to the complexity of the pandemic and especially the unforeseeable epidemiological consequences with respect to health, politicians did not put a great deal of attentions to sports. Thus, sport clubs had to invest their time in advocacy activities. Clubs of the same sport type, e.g., soccer and their superordinate professional associations of all levels, did lobbying, but there were also clubs of different sport types which collaborated for political lobbying. This in turn required that all parties concerned were able to align their interest in advance. Moreover, representatives of the different leagues as well as sports advocacy groups in general, such as Sport Austria and their members supported their lobbying initiatives. What refers to the content of advocacy, sport clubs primarily tried to influence or rather improve legal directives on national or federal level, but there were also lobbying iniatives on local level, e.g., regarding the (conditions of) use of public infrastructure. Defining as second mechanism of political work mainly covered the precision of top sport athletes as “own athlete category” which could enjoy exceptions respectively an ease of the legal Covid-19 measures. Sport clubs and their sport type specific professional associations were in an intensive extensive exchange for achieving pleasing results (for corresponding main activities of advocacy and defining see table 2).

*Cultural work*

Cultural works relates to the use of belief systems and values for anchoring the institutional project (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006) and manifests in the institutional endeavors of sport clubs in constructing identity, changing normative associations, constructing networks, visioning, and valorizing (for corresponding derived main activities see table 2). In sum, findings show that clubs and their superordinate associations invested much time and effort in the identification respectively development of dominant values. This refers to questions, such as, of how clubs can create identity in terms of community building in times of social distancing and bans of team trainings. They also engaged in creating visions or values for the sport clubs in the future. Whereas “identity questions” were (not surprisingly) mainly discussed intra-organizationally but were then spread virally across sport clubs and thus got a sport system relevant dimension, the latter one (future values) were often a result of interactions between sport clubs and their superordinate associations from the very beginning. Moreover, the pandemic partly changed cultural foundations of practices in sport, e.g., regarding volunteer engagement or the (previously supposed automatic) recruitment of young club members (atheletes) which partly could not be taken for granted any more. Hence, these problems came on the agenda of the sport clubs.

*Technical work*

Technical work refers to “designing frameworks that suggest, recommend or prescribe courses of action” (Barin Cruz et al. 2016, 998; c.f. Perkmann & Spicer, 2007). In our study, we identified mimicry, convening and enabling work as corresponding mechanisms for enabling institutional resilience. Digitalization offered a range for mimicry in the sport club systems. New online or rather digital competition formats as well as inter-organizational communication tools as new practices were associated with existing practices. Moreover, sport clubs, primarily local and regional ones, used convening in terms of collaborative problem-solving and started to organize events together. Furthermore, an inter-organizational informal exchange between sport clubs of different sport types regarding sector-wide legal issues, such as the extension of athletes’ contracts and epidemiological questions took place.

Figure 1. Sport club system with sport clubs as key player (own elaboration according to Pedras, Taylor& Frawley, 2020, modified)

**International**

**National**

**Federal** **state**

**Local**

**Profit/private**

**Non-profit**

**Public**

Local sponsors

&

media

Federal sponsors

&

media

Sport entre-prises

Internat.

sponsors

&

media

Sport entre-prises

National

sponsors

&

media

Sport entre-prises

Sport entre-prises

National governments

State governments

Public organisations & enterprises

Local governments

Leagues

Leagues

Leagues

Leagues

Sport type (un-)specific associations

Sport type (un-)specific associations

Sport type (un-)specific associations

Unions

Unions

**Informal sector & stakeholders**

Local society

Members & volun-teers

audience

Federal & regional

society

Members & volun-teers

audience

National society

Members & volun-teers

audience

audience

Internat.

society

Members & volun-teers

Table 2: Institutional work: constructs and main activities (own elaboration)

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | First-order construct definitions  and conceptual sources | Key References | Main activities in the context of the first order construct |
| **Political work**  (Second-order construct) | | | |
| Advocacy  (Lobbying) | The mobilization of political and regulatory support through direct and deliberate techniques of social suasion (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006) | Lawrence & Suddaby (2006)  c.f. Elsbach & Sutton (1992); Galvin (2002) | * Initiating and forcing dialogue with political decision makers to include team sport needs in Covid-19 policies/directives on federal level * Advocating team sports on local/regional level by demanding a flexible use of sport infrastructure * Mobilizing political support by targeted media work |
| Defining | The construction of rule systems that confer status or identity, define boundaries of membership or create status hierarchies (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006) | Lawrence & Suddaby (2006)  c.f. Fox-Wolfgramm et al. (1998) | * Defining the criteria of professional athletes in particular regarding the second league and young sports(we)men * Creating sport bubbles in terms of defining boundary-criteria for (professional) athletes as well as for young sports(we)men * Defining and training settings (e.g., subgroups) under hygienic and protective measures |
| **Cultural work**  (Second-order construct) | | | |
| Constructing identity | Defining the relationship between an actor and the field in which that actor operates (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006) | Lawrence & Suddaby (2006)  c.f. Lounsbury (2001), Oakes et al. (1998) | * Anchoring the club in its community and public by producing video challenges * Appealing that exerting sports represents a privilege in times of Covid-19-restrictions (bans on going out) * Self-reform/-definition of team sports, particularly in competition, without the team feeling or training, without the audience/club members/the community and without any competitions as core activity. |
| Changing normative associations | Re-making the connections between sets of practices and the moral and cultural foundations for those practices (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006) | Lawrence & Suddaby (2006)  Lawrence et al. (2002), Orssatto et al. (2002) | * Re-defining team sports (training) spirit in the context of individual (online) training by changing the language * Re-thinking the “taken-for-granted” norm of volunteers in sports clubs * Revising the basic assumption of automatic (self-running) recruitment of young athletes |
| Constructing networks | Constructing of interorganizational connections through which practices become normatively sanctioned and which form the relevant peer groups with respect to compliance, monitoring and evaluation (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006) | Lawrence & Suddaby (2006) | * Founding of interest groups, e.g., for promoting team sports and/or for promoting the needs of atheletes and clubs regarding superior associations * Re-vitalizing representatives of teams to spread information regarding Covid-19 rules, rights of athletes etc. |
| Visioning | Brainstorming and visioning the future market with other actors (Kaartemo, Nenonen & Windahl, 2020) | Kaartemo, Nenonen & Windahl 2020  c.f. Canales 2016; Jolly 2017 | * Encouraging women in club sports for taking over formal positions (as trainers, referees, club representatives) * Observing and discussing club sports as balancing act between mission orientation and professional sports orientation * Promoting the crucial importance of the sport club system for society in terms of entertainment and public health, e.g., for the physical mobility of kids. |
| Valorizing and demonizing | Providing for public consumption positive and negatives examples that illustrate the normative foundations of the institution (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006) | Lawrence & Suddaby (2006)  c.f. Angus (1993) | * Adapting soccer regulations (soccer is a role model in team sports) for the other types * Creating awareness and informing via social media posts and reels showing that the clubs are caring for their members, athletes and communities |
| **Technical work**  (Second-order construct) | | | |
| Mimicry | Associating new practices new practices with existing sets of taken-for-granted practices, technologies and rules in order to ease adoption (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006) | Lawrence & Suddaby (2006)  Hargadon & Douglas (2001); Jones (2001) | * Developing new digital presentation respectively competition formats (internet TV, play station) including selling tickets, sponsorship options * Developing online training formats (content and didactics) as well as communication/coordination formats * Using digital trend scouting for acquiring new atheletes |
| Convening | Creating collaborative arrangements in order to solve a particular problem (Dorado, 2005) | Slager, Gond & Moon (2012)  c.f. Dorado (2005) | * Forming collaborations regarding (inter-)national friendly matches as well as for renting ICTs equipment * Creating round tables for discussing trends/developments regarding Covid-19 and interpreting/operationalizing corresponding governmental directives * Dealing with various, partly controversial approaches of how to handle the contracts of athletes |
| Enabling Work | The creation of rules that facilitate, supplement and support institutions, such as the creation of authorizing agents for diverting resources (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006) | Lawrence & Suddaby (2006)  c.f. Leblebici et al. (1991) | * Using (soccer) leagues as distributor of Covid-19 testing materials * Pushing federal club associations in the position as experts for providing practical information for implementing Covid-19 directives |

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| In addition to the description of the main activities in table 2, table 3 includes exemplary quotes used for coding. | |
| Table 3: Illustration of quotes for coding (own elaboration) | |
| Type of insti-tutional work | Exemplary Quotes |
| Political work | |
| Advocacy  (Lobbying) | "Pressure, of course, you have to keep on doing and you have to “stay on the ball”. To be realistic, one must recognize that now professional ice hockey in Austria, in this crisis, of course, has not been in the top 3 of the topics for the federal government." (E12, 362 ff.) |
| Defining | "We created a player bubble in a broader sense. We shielded the atheletes. We really tried to achieve that they only move between the sporting facilities and their homes; well – of course, we did not completely forbade them shopping and so on." (E7, 524 ff.)  "The professional squad, everyone around the team, the inner circle, players, coaches, so I was one of the coaches and we were actually a “red zone”. The area in the hall where we moved and stayed, no other individuals were allowed [to stay] in this area and they tested us two or three times a week." (E4, 77 ff.) |
| Cultural work | |
| Constructing identity | "I think that one reason for being an athlete and for enjoying this is that adrenaline which is released when the crowds are either roaring for you or against you, and when they are missing, it's extremely difficult.” (E2, 538 ff.) |
| Changing normative associations | "Exactly. As I said, the language, we moved from a technical, from a tactical to a more people-centered one and to a more game centered dialogue. The goal was to focus on the game rather than on the technical or tactical stuff. We were asked to create an environment where a dialogue about the game is created for the players. We really made progress in this respect, especially with the language." (E4, 255 ff.) "I believe that by means of our own language, a new history actually begun […]. We tried to bring in a value. The focus is on the quality of our program.” (E4, 355 ff.) |
| Constructing networks | "It started in mid-August, I talked to players until the beginning of October or the end of September. There was a rising need, again and again, to unite the players and to form interest groups, so to say, in order to be able to enforce their needs towards the league, the clubs and also towards the associations." (E6, 15 ff.) |
| Visioning | We should become a sports country, like Sweden, where everyone does sports. This is the basis for top sport […]. How can you achieve this? Maybe through a Mother and Baby Book, so that you already, so to speak, train pregnant women or the family how important sport is. […] There have to be certain incentives via the insurance, if you do sports." (E8, 542 ff.) |
| Valorizing and demonizing | "There was an international challenge with various clubs from Europe, where tricks were demonstrated, and the boys then imitated them. Then, they were evaluated a bit. That was cool, of course, because they could compete a bit internationally, alike to competitions.”(F3. 305 ff.) |
| Technical work | |
| Mimicry | "As far as player scouting is concerned, as far as player acquisition is concerned, we had also restrictions (yes). Thus, we were much in contact with various players digitally and did digital scouting." (F10, 138 ff.) |
| Convening | "To achieve something together, because it's also a common interest." (IP7, 36 ff.)  "We had weekly Zoom meetings with the Bundesliga, with Upper Austrian [authorities], with the magistrate […]. Subsequently, [we discussed the regulations] with clubs, we had a look to each other, how the others handle it. That's always a point, anyway, that you try to work well together with other clubs, not only because of Corona." (F10, 484 ff.)  "I think that was one of the biggest points that enabled us to continue playing, were our discussions [regarding Covid rules] with the Ministry of Health and they also gave the okay then." (F10, 527 ff.) |
| Enabling Work | "We actually had a daily exchange with Sport Austria, which used to be the BSO. They did a great job and translated everything that the federal government has enacted into practice, so to say. There were video conferences every day and discussions about how we could adapt this for the clubs.” (E8, 452 ff.) |

1. **Discussion and conclusions**

Our findings demonstrate, how sport clubs enable institutional resilience in an extreme context. In our case that is the resilience of club sport system in the Covid-19 pandemic. By showing, how a collective of actors can deal with an adversity, we analyze the macro-perspective of resilience which is poorly explored (Krlev, 2022). At the same time, we illustrate the rarely researched relation between institutional challenges in sports – prevailing in form of the Covid-19 pandemic – and institutional work.

Our findings cover a wide range of political, cultural and technical work mechanisms. In comparison to Barin Cruz et al. (2016) we identified a stronger focus on cultural work. The majority of institutional work mechanisms were assigned to this category. Hence, there was a more intense use of values and of the belief system for anchoring the institutional project in the pandemic than in the context of the earthquake in Haiti. This may be rooted in the unforeseeable and long-term consequences of the pandemic compared to a natural disaster. This in turn emphasizes once more the significance of a context specific response to adversity (Hällgren et al., 2018).

It also becomes apparent in our paper that achieving institutional resilience in the sport club system concentrated more on creation work than on maintenance work, even though, creation work can also be regarded as maintenance work (Nite & Edwards, 2021). This applies to political, to cultural as well as to technical work mechanisms. It is most likely that this can be attributed to the fact that the disruptions were very encompassing or rather implied at least a temporal collapse of the system. Hence, sport clubs mobilized intensively time and human resources e.g., in order to do lobbying, integrate new practices or to re-think cultural foundations of practices. These endeavors also resulted in service innovations as well as in new institutional collaborations. In particular, in the smaller clubs the pandemic has proved to be a suitable medium for entrepreneurial activities.

Finally, our study also supports Hills´ (2000) findings that institutional resilience is the result of the (sport club) system as a whole rather than of special actors, e.g., of superordinate associations and their bridging function. Sport clubs represent the nucleus of institutional work because institutional resilience is mainly based on the bottom-up iniatives of sport clubs but executed or rather performed as system. In sum, the sport club system benefited from the existing and good alignment of the different actors, which partly became even better in the pandemic. This corresponds to the significance of social capital in institutional resilience (Barin Cruz et al., 2016).

We *contribute* variously to consisting research. Predominately, we contribute to resilience research by enhancing the understanding of institutional resilience. First, this is accomplished by identifying which institutional work activities with whom (partners) are provided by the sport clubs. Thus, the kind as well as the combination of institutional work mechanisms as basis of actions for practices become clear(er). Secondly, we contribute to the multi-level discussion of resilience which primarily refers to individual, team, and organizational level by exploring the macro-level. In detail, we do this by analyzing institutional level as further lever for enabling resilience. Third, by following an institutional work perspective, we refine knowledge about the relation between institutional work and institutional challenges in the sport sector, such as the “Covid-19 threat” which manifest in an illustration of institutional work mechanisms suitable for the club sport sector in the context of a pandemic. In this context we particularly nuance, adopt and complement the findings of Barin Cruz et al (2016) focusing on the development aid sector for the sport club system and contribute this way to sport research.

In line with Hills (2000) we can *conclude* for our study that institutional resilience is rather reactive than strategic. The majority of the institutional work activities for responding the adversity was triggered by the pandemic and was not the result of purposive or long-term considerations in advance. Thus, we would like to emphasize the importance of integrating considerations regarding institutional resilience in organizational strategy development. Our findings also underscore the high relevance of a wide range of institutional work mechanisms. It is the combination of mechanisms which leads to successful “crisis” response. Furthermore, we could observe that interorganizational exchanges and collaborations effectuated that “best practices” of organizational resilience can be (at least partly) transformed to institutional resilience. Finally, we could gain the impression that the handling of defeats which are inherent to sport competitions as well as the community spirit as characteristic of clubs crucially supported institutional work.

Our findings have some *limitations*, though. At first, the sole focus on sport clubs may imply a limited transferability to other branches or industries. Secondly, we did not conduct interviews over the whole period of the pandemic (2020 to 2022) but only covered about one year (April 2021 to March 2022) which limits our findings to this period. Thirdly, there are some limitations resulting from the methodical choices, in our case the qualitative expert interviews. Qualitative interviews potentially go along with a researcher bias resulting from the subjectivity of researchers. This can result in a poorer quality of data analysis and interpretation. Moreover, the retrospective nature of interviews and the self-reported data may be associated with social desirability bias and recall bias. The interview setting (e.g., time pressure of some leaders) and the interview design (e.g., different intensities of questioning) can also be a source for bias (Althubaiti, 2016).

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